

Remarks at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner

April 29, 2023

The President. Well, thank you, Tam, for that introduction—I think. [*Laughter*]

Let me start on a serious note. Jill, Kamala, Doug, and I and members of our administration are here to send a message to the country and, quite frankly, to the world: The free press is a pillar—maybe the pillar—of a free society, not the enemy.

Thomas Jefferson wrote—[*applause*—]you all know this quote. Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate . . . to prefer the latter."

To Evan's parents Ella, Mikhail, and sister Danielle, as I've told you in person: We—not just me—we all stand with you. Evan went to report in Russia to shed light on the darkness that you all escaped from years ago.

Absolute courage. A handwritten letter from prison to his family, Evan wrote, quote, "I am not losing hope." In an interview, his mom Ella said: "One of the American qualities that we absorbed is to be optimistic. That's where we stand right now."

To the entire family: Everyone in this hall stands with you. We're working every day to secure his release, looking at opportunities and tools to bring him home. We keep the faith.

We also keep the faith for Austin—Austin Tice. His mom Debra is here tonight. She knows from our several conversations—the conversations with me and my senior staff—we are not giving up.

As I told you at this dinner last year, as I told you in the Oval Office, you've raised an incredible son. When he was a kid, he was an Eagle Scout, a Big Brother, a born protector, a U.S. marine—three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Austin—Austin was a fearless journalist and a future lawyer.

As a consequence of Austin showing the world the cost of war, he's been detained in Syria for nearly 11 years. It's simply wrong. It's outrageous. And we are not ceasing our effort to get him, find him, and bring him home.

Tonight our message is this: Journalism is not a crime. Evan and Austin should be released immediately, along with every other American held hostage or wrongfully detained abroad.

Paul Whelan—unjustly held in Russia for more than 4 years, whose brave sister I've met with and whose family has never quit fighting for Paul. And I promise, you neither will I and neither will this administration until we get him home.

And there are other Americans being unjustly held in Iran, Venezuela, China, and elsewhere. Their stories may not make headlines or hashtags, but every day—every day—their family looks at that empty chair at the kitchen table—birthdays, anniversaries, holidays without them. The pain of living in limbo, in a sense, is almost worse than the pain of having lost a child and looking at that empty chair. The stress of not knowing. The sorrow of uncertainty.

But I want them and their families to know Jill and I understand. We see them. They are not forgotten. And I promise you, I am working like hell to get them home. As a nation, we'll never give up on hope. Things can get better. Things can turn. Things can change.

Tonight, unlike last year, Brittney Griner is here with her wife Cherelle. Brittney, where you are, kid? Stand up. Come on. I love this woman. Love you, Brittney.

This time last year, we were praying for you, Brittney, hoping you knew how hard all of us were fighting for your release. It's great to have you home. And, boy, I can hardly wait to see you back on the court, kid. Remember your promise. I get to bring my granddaughter, my All-State girl, to see you. Right? *[Laughter]*

Because of our unrelenting efforts, we've been able to bring home dozens of hostages and wrongfully detainees—wrongful detainees from Afghanistan, Burma, Haiti, Iran, Rwanda, Venezuela, across West Africa, around the world.

But we're doing everything we can to prevent these cases from occurring in the first place. For example, the State Department added the threat of detention as a new risk indicator to its travel advisories to go along with the threat of kidnapping to warn Americans where these threats are highest abroad.

I also recently signed an Executive order increasing the consequences for criminal groups and terrorists who engage in the appalling practice of treating human beings as bargaining chips, political pawns. And, just 2 days ago, my administration announced the first sanctions under this new authority, punishing individuals and security services in Russia and Iran who've been part of the wrongful detention of Americans.

Above all, across Government, experts are working day and night to bring our fellow Americans home, much of which, as you well know, we can't talk about; concern that it will backfire. But my commitment—my commitment—is to bring them home, just as I know your commitment is to continue to be a free and fearless press.

And that's what we honor tonight. And this is not hyperbole: You make it possible—you make it possible for ordinary citizens to question authority—and yes, even to laugh at authority—without fear or intimidation. That's what makes this Nation strong.

So tonight let us show ourselves and the world our strength, not just by the example of our power, but by the power of our example.

Folks, I know a lot has changed in the press. I've had a lot of conversations with a lot of you. This is not your father's press from 20 years ago. No, I'm serious. And you all know it better than I do. But still, it is absolutely consequential and essential.

After all, I believe in the First Amendment, not just because my good friend Jimmy Madison wrote it. *[Laughter]*

Look, in a lot of ways, this dinner sums up my first 2 years in office. *[Laughter]* I'll talk for 10 minutes, take zero questions, and cheerfully walk away. *[Laughter]*

Yes, I know, I just announced my reelection campaign. Some of you—*[applause]*. Some of you scooped that I'd announce in a video. But really, you really all thought in your heart that I'd just blurt it out, didn't you? *[Laughter]*

White House Correspondents' Association Vice President Kelly O'Donnell of NBC News. We tried. *[Laughter]*

The President. And look, I get that age is a completely reasonable issue. It's on everybody's mind. And everyone—by "everyone" I mean the New York Times. *[Laughter]* Headline: "Biden's Advanced Age Is a Big Issue. Trump's, However, Is Not." *[Laughter]*

Sorry, that was a New York Times Pitchbot. I apologize. *[Laughter]* I love that guy. I should do an interview with him. *[Laughter]*

You might think I don't like Rupert Murdoch. That's simply not true. How could I dislike the guy who makes me look like Harry Styles? *[Laughter]*

You call me old? I call it being seasoned. You say I'm ancient? I say I'm wise. You say I'm over the hill? Don Lemon would say that's a man in his prime. *[Laughter]*

Folks, it's wonderful to be back here again, proving I haven't learned a damn thing. *[Laughter]* I want everybody to have fun tonight, but please be safe. If you find yourself disoriented or confused, it's either you're drunk or Marjorie Taylor Greene. *[Laughter]*

Tam, thank you for hosting us. I love NPR——

[At this point, the President leaned toward the microphone.]

——because they whisper into the mike like I do. *[Laughter]* But not everybody loves NPR. Elon Musk tweeted that it should be defunded. Well, the best way to make NPR go away is for Elon Musk to buy it. *[Laughter]* And that's more true than you think. *[Laughter]* Anyway.

This dinner is one of the two great traditions in Washington. The other one is underestimating me and Kamala. Well, the truth is, we really have a record to be proud of. Vaccinated the Nation. Transformed the economy. Earned historic legislative victories and midterm results.

But the job isn't finished. I mean, it is finished for Tucker Carlson.

Audience members. Ooh!

The President. What are you wooing about like that? *[Laughter]* Like you think that's not reasonable? Give me a break. *[Laughter]* Just give me a break.

Look, like I often say, don't compare me to the Almighty, compare me to the alternative. We added 12 million jobs, and that's just counting the lawyers to—who defended the President. *[Laughter]*

Had Ron DeSantis—I had a lot of Ron DeSantis jokes ready, but Mickey Mouse beat the hell out of me and got there first. *[Laughter]* Now, look, can't be too rough on the guy. After his reelection as Governor, he was asked if he had a mandate. He said, "Hell no, I'm straight." *[Laughter]* "I'm straight."

I'll give you time to think that one through.

Ms. O'Donnell. That's good. That's good.

Vice President Kamala D. Harris. That's really nice.

The President. You got it?

Vice President Harris. Really good. *[Laughter]*

The President. Look, you all keep reporting my approval rating is at 42 percent. But what do you—but I think you don't know this: Kevin McCarthy called me and asked me, "Joe, what the hell is your secret?" *[Laughter]* I'm not even kidding about that one. *[Laughter]*

The Speaker is trying to claim a big win this week, but the last time Republicans voted on something this—that hapless, it took 15 tries.

Audience members. Ooh!

The President. That was good. *[Laughter]*

Look, it's great the cable news networks are here tonight: MSNBC, owned by NBC Universal; Fox News, owned by Dominion Voting Systems. *[Laughter]*

Last year, your favorite Fox News reporters were able to attend because they were fully vaccinated and boosted. This year, with that \$787 million settlement, they're here because they couldn't say no to a free meal. *[Laughter]*

And hell, I'd call Fox honest, fair, and truthful, but then I could be sued for defamation. *[Laughter]* It ain't nothing compared to what they do to me. *[Laughter]*

Look, I hope the Fox News team finds this funny. My goal is to make them laugh as hard as CNN did when they read the settlement. *[Laughter]* But then again, CNN was like, "Wow, they actually have \$787 million?" *[Laughter]* Whoa.

Folks, I go where people are, "The Daily Show." Roy is a great guy. He once dubbed me the Jay-Z of Delaware. *[Laughter]* Don't let that look on your face. You did.

Tonight he asked me to keep it short. He even offered me 10 bucks if I'd keep it under 10 minutes. That's a switch: a President being offered hush money. *[Laughter]*

Look, I'm going to leave the jokes to the pros. But let me conclude on a genuinely serious note. Roy was born in Birmingham, Alabama. He graduated from a great HBCU, Florida A&M. He started in journalism to follow in the footsteps of his father, Roy Wood, Sr., who covered the civil rights movement.

During Black History Month this year, I hosted the screening of the movie "Till." The story of Emmett Till and his mother is a story of a family's promise and loss and a nation's reckoning with hate, violence, and the abuse of power.

It's a story that was seared into our memory and our conscience—the Nation's conscience—when Mrs. Till insisted that an open casket for her murdered and maimed 14-year-old son be the means by which he was transported. She said, "Let the people see what I've seen."

The reason the world saw what she saw was because of another hero in this story: the Black press. That's a fact. JET magazine, the Chicago Defender, and other Black radio and newspapers were unflinching and brave in making sure America saw what she saw. And I mean it.

Ida B. Wells—*[applause]*. Ida B. Wells once said, and I quote, "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon the wrongs." Turn the light of truth upon the wrongs. That's the sacred view, in my view. That's the sacred charge of a free press. And I mean that.

That's what someone we still miss so much, who you honored posthumously, stood for. Gwen Ifill. You know, she was among the very best. We talked about it at the table. She moderated my first debate for Vice President and was a trusted voice for millions of Americans.

Gwen understood that the louder the noise, the more it's on all of us to cut through the noise to the truth. The truth matters.

As I said last year at this dinner, a poison is running through our democracy and parts of the extreme press. The truth buried by lies and lies living on as truth.

Lies told for profit and power. Lies of conspiracy and malice repeated over and over again, designed to generate a cycle of anger, hate, and even violence. A cycle that emboldens history to be buried, books to be banned, children and families to be attacked by the state, and the rule of law and our rights and freedoms to be stripped away. And where elected representatives of the people are expelled from statehouses for standing for the people.

I've made clear that we know in our bones—and you know it too—our democracy remains at risk. But I've also made it clear, as I've seen throughout my life, it's within our power, each and every one of us, to preserve our democracy. We can. We must. We will.

I'd like to make a toast—if I had a glass. *[Laughter]*

[The President was handed a glass by White House Correspondents' Association President Tamara Keith of NPR.]

My grandfather Ambrose Finnegan said, "If you ever make a toast without liquor, you've got to hold it in your left hand." *[Laughter]* You all think I'm kidding. I'm not. I'm probably the only Irishman you've ever met who's never had a drink in his life. But anyway.

I'd like to make a toast, seriously.

At this inflection point in history, let us commit that we'll be a nation that will embrace light over darkness, truth over lies, and finally, finally, finally restore the soul of the Nation.

Hear, hear.

[The President offered a toast.]

Audience members. Hear, hear.

The President. Ladies and gentleman——

Can I give you that?

Ms. Keith. Yes.

[The President handed Ms. Keith his glass.]

The President. I'm going to turn us over to Roy. Roy, the podium is yours.

I'm going to be fine with your jokes, but I'm not sure about Dark Brandon.

[The President put on a pair of sunglasses.]

[Laughter] It's all yours, pal.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:14 p.m. at the Washington Hilton hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Harris; Evan Gershkovich, a Wall Street Journal reporter who was arrested by Russian authorities on March 29, and his mother Ella Milman, father Mikhail Gershkovich, and sister Danielle Gershkovich; Austin B. Tice, a reporter for McClatchy Newspapers who was abducted outside Damascus, Syria, on August 14, 2012; Paul N. Whelan, a U.S. citizen who was arrested and held on espionage charges by Russian security services in Moscow, Russia, on December 28, 2018, and his sister Elizabeth; Brittney Y. Griner, center for WNBA's Phoenix Mercury who was detained by Russian authorities for nearly 10 months in 2022; Members of Parliament Taras Kozak and Oleh Voloshyn of Ukraine and former Ukrainian officials Volodymyr Oliynyk and Vladimir Sivkovich, who are accused of working at the direction of the Russian Government to destabilize Ukraine; Rochester, NY, resident Doug J. Ballon, whose "New York Times Pitchbot" Twitter posts satirize the newspaper's headlines and articles; Rupert Murdoch, executive chairman, News Corp.; musician Harry Styles; Don Lemon, former anchor, CNN's "CNN This Morning" program; Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene; Elon R. Musk, chief executive officer, Twitter, Inc.; Tucker Carlson, former host, Fox News's "Tucker Carlson Tonight" program; former President Donald J. Trump; Gov. Ronald D. DeSantis of Florida; comedian Roy Wood, Jr., keynote speaker, in his capacity as a correspondent for Comedy Central's "Daily Show With Trevor Noah"; and musician and producer Shawn C. "Jay-Z" Carter. He also referred to his granddaughter Roberta M. "Maisy" Biden; and Executive Order 14078. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on April 30.

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